

19 October 2023, Cairo, Egypt

Secretary-General's press encounter after meeting with the Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sameh Hassan Shoukry Selim

Assalam alaikum.

Your Excellency Minister Shoukry and dear friends, thank you for your warm welcome and for your vital work.

Through you, allow me to recognize and salute President el-Sisi for his critical leadership.

I am in the Middle East on a humanitarian mission at a moment of profound crisis – a crisis unlike any the region has seen in decades.

That crisis was triggered by the atrocious 7 October Hamas attacks that killed, injured and kidnapped a large number of civilians – from Israel and, indeed, around the world.

This led Israel to a total siege on Gaza and a relentless bombing campaign, with an ever-mounting toll on civilians – the vast majority of whom are women and children, but also journalists, health workers and many others including our own UN staff.

Let me be very clear in reaffirming that international humanitarian law must be respected; that the protection of civilians is also a must and any attack on a hospital or a school or UN premises are forbidden under international law.

In the face of this humanitarian catastrophe, I am calling for two immediate humanitarian actions.

To Hamas, for the immediate and unconditional release of the hostages.

To Israel, for immediate unrestricted access of humanitarian aid to respond to the most basic needs of the people of Gaza.

Let me be clear. The Palestinian people have legitimate and deep grievances after 56 years of occupation.

But, as serious as those grievances are, they cannot justify terror attacks.

And as appalling as those attacks have been, they cannot justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people.

Both of my humanitarian appeals are essential in and of themselves.

To help realize these two appeals, I am calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire.

For nearly two weeks, the people of Gaza have gone without any shipments of fuel, food, water, medicine and other essentials.

Disease is spreading. Supplies are dwindling. People are dying. And I was horrified by the images of deaths and destruction in the Al-Ahli hospital.

Civilians in Gaza desperately need core services and supplies – and for that we need rapid, unimpeded humanitarian access.

We need food, water, medicine and fuel now – we need it at scale - and we need it to be sustained.

It is not one small operation that is required. It is a sustained effort to deliver humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza.

In plain terms, that means humanitarians need to be able to get the aid in – and they need to be able to distribute it safely.

I am in Egypt to witness UN preparations to be able to deliver massive support to the people of Gaza.

In this lifesaving effort, the El Arish airport and the Rafah crossing are not only critical, they are our only hope.

They are the lifelines to the people of Gaza.

Through its actions and through its openness, Egypt is showing how it is a pillar of multilateral cooperation – and a linchpin in helping to defuse tensions and to ease colossal human pain and suffering.

We know the longer this goes on, the greater the risk of the violence spilling over.

And we must work to avoid this at all costs. And Egypt has been in the forefront of these efforts. A humanitarian ceasefire is also an essential part of that effort.

I look forward to supporting this and other initiatives through intense diplomatic engagement in Egypt – starting here and now.

And never forget that in the end, we need a permanent solution, as it was referred [by Foreign Minister Shoukry.] No solution is possible without the creation of an independent Palestinian state, side by side with Israel with mutual security guaranteed and in line with the international resolutions and in line with the agreements that were established between the two parties.

Thank you once again.

Shukran.

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